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ABSTRACT

Advocates of high standards and expectations usually believe that gaps in reading achievement can be eliminated with good teaching, but slow readers need a specially designed reading curriculum. The teacher first needs to use an informal reading inventory to determine the student's reading level. Functioning generally on a higher level than students with mental retardation but on a lower level than average students are a large number of students known as slow learners (approximately 14% of the school population). Slow learners tend to be concrete in their thinking, need help with strategies and organization, and be eager for success. To sequence learnings from the concrete and the semiconcrete to print requires careful planning on the teacher's part. The teacher must study slow readers to realize how much background information they need before they engage in reading print. The teacher also must select library books carefully to read to slow readers and to notice whether students are following the content being read. Perhaps the best way to emphasize a student's becoming skilled in word recognition is to stress use of context clues. Next to context clues, phonics may be stressed to unlock unknown words. Students may need learning opportunities to notice words on flash cards or a computer program. With flash cards, peers like to work together on drill and practice activities. Slow readers need much guidance from the teacher to develop sequential skills in word recognition and in comprehension. By listening to stories read aloud and being engaged in successful reading experiences, the slow learner might well make reading a lifetime endeavor. (NKA)

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Reading and the Slow Learner.

by Marlow Ediger

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READING AND THE SLOW LEARNER

Slow learners need to experience a reading curriculum which helps them to succeed. In an era of high standards for pupils to achieve in reading, the tendency will be to use reading materials which others in the regular classroom will be using. Thus, fast, average, and slow achievers will be reading and discussing the same materials. Advocates of high standards and expectations tend to believe that gaps in reading achievement can be eliminated with good teaching. The burden is on the teacher to eliminate achievement gaps. This is shown by the following statements:

1. if pupils are in a failing school for two consecutive school yeas, as measured by state mandated tests, they may transfer to a different school, perhaps with voucher money. A state may take over a school if pupil achievement, as indicated by state mandated tests, remains below requirements. Thus, there are educational bankruptcy laws.
2. pupils are to read on grade level, such as a third grader reading third grade materials. Pupils are to be tested, using state mandated tests on grades three through eight, to notice reading deficiencies as well as progress of the learner. Sequential tests are to be given to notice under whose teaching a pupil is making progress or is not achieving adequately. School district results on these state mandated tests will be published in the news media and will be known as a report card.
Parents and the lay public might then see which are good schools and those which hinder pupil achievement in reading.
3. state mandated exit exams can be used to prevent failing students from receiving a high school diploma. This is known as high stakes testing. A question arises, "Will pupils with a 71 to 85 IQ be required to be tested using the same standards and the same state mandated tests as are other pupils, including the gifted?" If so, state mandated tests may emphasize exceedingly high standards for the slow learner and very low standards for the gifted and talented pupil (Ediger and Rao, 2003, Chapter Seven).

Helping the Slow Reader to Achieve

Slow readers need a specially designed reading curriculum. They need to read materials on their instructional level, not the frustrational level, nor should the reading materials be too easy. What are some guidelines for the teacher to use when designing

an instructional level reading curriculum?

First, the teacher needs to use an informal reading inventory (IRA) to determine the present reading level of the pupil. For some pupils, it is difficult to ascertain reading levels unless an IRI is used, especially for the slow reader. The teacher may then use the basal reading series which is presently being used. The series will then be used for the slow reader to read aloud to the teacher from each grade level of reader. The pupil will start reading at the beginning from the very first book in the series. A 100 running word selection may then be read aloud to the teacher. Sequentially, the pupil continues reading aloud from the simplest to the more complex textbook reader until the learner can read correctly 95 out of 100 running words, approximately. This is the instructional level of reading. There are then five words the pupil cannot identify out of 100; they can be acquired as a result of instruction. Going below the 95 out of 100 words being identified correctly makes for feelings of frustration by the slow reader. Then too comprehension will be hindered. In addition to reading 95 per cent of the words encountered correctly, the pupil should also answer correctly 75 per cent of the questions raised by the teacher covering the 100 running words. Finding the place to begin instruction for slow readers is important. From then on, sequential progress can be made.

With state mandated testing, there has been too much of the following:

1. pressuring pupils to achieve in order to pass the state mandated tests.
2. drilling pupils on test taking skills and on possible content in the test.
3. minimizing those academic areas that are not on the test.
4. focusing on doing well on the test to the detriment of being a caring, concerned individual for the self as well as for others. Thus, democracy as a way of life needs to be emphasized.
5. working on the academics only in a few curriculum areas, rather than experiencing balance in knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the instructional arena (See Ediger, 2002, 86- 89).

Functioning generally on a higher level than students with mental retardation but on a lower level than than average students are a large number of students known as slow learners. They make up approximately 14 per cent of the school population. Because they have IQ scores between 71 and 85 approximately, they function on too high a level to be classified as having mental retardation, but are frequently excluded from

the learning disabled and remedial reading programs because their IQ scores are too low. Although they have special needs, slow learners are often denied special services.

Slow learners manifest some of the same characteristics that students with mental retardation display, but to a lesser degree. They tend to be concrete in their thinking, need help with strategies and organization, and are eager for success. Their executive functioning is on a higher level than that of children with mental retardation. They are better able to decide when and where to use strategies and are better able to classify and group information. They are also more aware of their mental processes and can take more responsibility for their learning. In terms of instruction, these are "more so" students; they need the same instruction that regular students need, but more so. They must be given more guidance, more practice, and more time to complete tasks. One of their greatest needs is to have materials and instruction on their level ... (Gunning, 2000).

Slow learners need to experience the concrete and semiconcrete in teaching and learning situations. If pupils then are to read about dinosaurs, for example, they should see, touch, feel, and observe models of dinosaurs. Pupils should also view illustrations of dinosaurs of which they will be reading about. The closer the concrete and semiconcrete experiences are to what will be read, the more likely it will be that learners will have the background information to read about dinosaurs in the abstract reading materials. Meaningful learning is very important to the slow learner. Thus, reading must make sense to the learner. Building background information is extremely salient to the slow reader.

To sequence learnings from the concrete and the semiconcrete to print requires careful planning on the teacher's part. The teacher must study slow readers and to realize how much background information is necessary before they engage in reading print discourse. These pupils will need more assistance as compared to other children in the classroom who are doing well in reading instruction. When reading abstract words, the slow learner will need adequate practice to master new learnings. When a Big Book approach is used in teaching reading, the slow learner may need to have more rereading experiences than is usually the case for most children. Rereading makes it so that the slow reader can master each word. Patience on the teacher's part is of utmost importance! Phonics may be brought in the whole language approach when having pupils find a word that begins like "boy" or "girl" when

these beginning letters are on the page being read in the Big Book. Each pupil needs to be able to see clearly the printed words in the Big Book. Later in time when pupils are ready, the teacher may ask for words on the printed page which end like "cat" or "fall." Which words to emphasize from the printed page that begin or end like a chosen word is open for teacher judgment. Each pupil should be given ample time to locate these words and practice their identification until mastery occurs.

The teacher also needs to select carefully library books to read to slow readers. These books need to capture learner interest. The teacher needs to have eye contact with pupils while reading to them and at the same time show the related illustrations on the page(s) being read. Improved understanding should result when pupils see the semiconcrete in the illustrations and hear the related words being pronounced. Pupils should enjoy listening to stories read aloud. The content in the story should help pupils in wanting to read the same and other stories, build learner vocabulary, perceive sequence of ideas, notice conventions in written work, and hear beauty in language. The success of reading orally to children may be noticed through the attention pupils give to what is being read, knowledge revealed from stories listened to to discussion participation in different curriculum areas, vocabulary growth, and enthusiasm for listening, as well as for reading library books. The entire language arts curriculum should emphasize continuous achievement in reading. The teacher needs to notice if pupils are carefully following the content being read. The word "slow" is merely used to identify a given group of readers and not to orally call these learners "slow" by name (Ediger and Rao, 2000, Chapter Ten).

Recognizing Unknown Words

There is always a problem for slow readers in identifying unknown words. When too much stress is placed on phonics and other word recognition skills, pupils may lose out on ideas in context. Certainly, the major goal in reading should be to comprehend and understand that which is being read silently or orally. Phonics and syllabication should not be learned for its own sake, but be considered as important tools to identify unknown word. Perhaps, the best way to emphasize pupil's becoming skilled in word recognition is to stress the use of context clues. Context clues indicate a pupil identifying a word by looking at other words within a sentence or even more than

one sentence. At the beginning phases of reading instruction, the teacher needs to emphasize the pupil identifying an unknown within a specific sentence. When assisting pupils with context clue use in word recognition, the teacher should permit about a five second interval before using the context clue method. Thus, pupils should be given a chance to identify the unknown before assistance is given. Each pupil needs to become independent here and not depend upon outside help without first trying to determine the unknown. Words pupils give for the unknown should be meaningful and make sense. Sometimes the most ridiculous words are given and do not fit within the other words in the sentence. Pupils need to realize that sense making here is of utmost importance (See Strommen and Mates, 1997).

Pupils need adequate opportunities to use context clues and practice the use thereof. Hurrying pupils in skill development generally makes for frustration. It is very important for pupils to have esteem needs met by being more successful in reading and being recognized for making improvements. Pupils should move from where they are presently to some ideal in reading achievement. Growth in using context clues will tend to come slowly and needs much practice and reinforcement. Slow learners need to feel successful in mastering salient reading skills. No one likes to be a failure, but desires to feel successful in ongoing endeavors. The slow learner, in particular, wishes to be a good reader and, with proper guidance, will strive to do so. When teaching pupils to use context clues, careful sequence needs to be in evidence.

A pupil may not be accepted by others due to being a poor reader. Being accepted is salient in the life of the child. Each person desires to belong and not be an isolate. The reading curriculum can definitely be more successful if feelings of belonging on the pupil's part exist.

Next to the use of context clues, phonics may be stressed to unlock unknown words. Phonics should be emphasized after a child has had a chance to independently identify a word. The five second rule is good to follow in that the learner should be given fife seconds in time approximately to identify the unknown word before phonics is stressed within the ongoing reading lesson. The pupil's attention here should be focused upon the initial consonant letter of an unidentified word in the reading lesson, to begin with, in associating a sound with the letter or symbol. Should the pupil be able to do this, then the rest of the word may be familiar with additional context clue use. If not, the pupil may be guided to notice the ending symbol or grapheme. The word then needs to be pronounced correctly by the pupil or by the

teacher if the pupil is unable to do so. Pupils may need more learning opportunities to notice words on flash cards or on a computerized program. With flash cards, peers do like to work together in drill and practice activities. Working on a computer may be more interesting for some learners and good programs can be developed for word mastery for those words causing problems to the learner. For example, a sentence with a blank space on the monitor might contain four possible words as choices for the unknown. The child is to choose which one fits in properly and yet each begins with the same initial consonant letter. For example, the sentence with one omitted word may read as follows: The dish on the ----- was broken. The four given answers to the blank space may be the following: top, table, tool, tape. The learner is to use context clues and also phonics since the correct word may not be recognized by context clues alone. It is then necessary to sound out each given word. Computer programs should provide drill and practice on what pupils need in reading instruction be it work in context clues to identify words, specific letters to associate sounds with consistent symbols, and/or problems with syllabication. Many letters in the English alphabet lack consistency between symbol and sound. This provides an argument for using whole language instruction since the pupil's attention is given to ideas being read in the Big Book approach, as one example, and not to isolated sounds. By focusing too much on isolated letters, the pupil's attention digresses from ideas being read (Ediger, ERIC, 2001).

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) wrote the following objectives for guided reading which serve well in all reading programs:

* it gives children the opportunity to develop as individual readers while participating in a socially supported activity.
* it gives teachers the opportunity to observe individuals as they process new texts.
* it gives individual readers the opportunity to develop strategies that they can read increasingly difficult difficult texts independently.
* it gives children enjoyable, successful experiences in reading for meaning.
* it develops the abilities needed for independent reading.
* it helps children learn how to introduce texts to themselves.

Slow readers need much guidance from the teacher in order to develop sequential skills in word recognition and in comprehension. They need patient assistance to become the

best readers possible. Reading for enjoyment should be an end objective for all pupils. By listening to stores read aloud by the teacher and by being engaged in successful reading experiences, the slow learner should become one who will make reading a life time endeavor.

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